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ABSTRACT

The single-parent, woman-headed, post-divorce family has become an increasingly prevalent family form and one which merits further research attention in order to identify competencies and stresses characteristic of this lifestyle. The life situations of a sample of women (N=47) were investigated in terms of their perceived levels of competence in three life roles (parent, social participant, self-supporter). Their role-specific perceived competencies were related to evaluations of life satisfaction. Subjects were interviewed in their homes and administered a battery of self-report instruments. Results suggest that the parenting role is clearly an area of high perceived competence. Most women felt least competent in the self-support role, while the social participant role was also an area of diminished perceived competence. Greater specificity of the roles examined would yield more detailed data for understanding the stresses and strengths in the family of single parent divorced women, and is recommended. (Author/KMF)

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LIFE SATISFACTION AND PERCEIVED ROLE COMPETENCE IN SINGLE PARENT DIVORCED WOMEN

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Life Satisfaction and Perceived Role Competence in Single Parent Divorced Women[1]

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The single parent, woman headed, post-divorce family has become an increasingly prevalent family form (Glick, 1978) and one which merits further research attention in order to identify competencies and stresses characteristic of this lifestyle. Substantial numbers of American women, throughout the lifespan and representative of all socioeconomic levels, have been coping with the changes that accompany marital dissolution (VanDusen & Sheldon, 1976), or are anticipating such transitions.

Many aspects of divorce have been documented in recent psychological and sociological literature although an integration of these finding particularly with regard to factors that affect the life satisfaction of divorced persons, has often been missing. Four specific trends in the literature which seem relevant to building a model for the understanding of the life situation of divorced mothers can be identified.

First, earlier researchers often applied a deficit model, approaching departures from the traditional nuclear family as deviant. Remaining single after divorce has been associated with poverty, loneliness, inadequacy as a parent, promiscuity, and psychopathology (c.f. Glass & Navarre, 1965). Changing views of the family, accompanied by an increased emphasis on individual autonomy and changing role expectations, helped to shift the paradigm for studying divorce (Nye & Berardo, 1973).

These changes can be seen in a second trend in the literature, a move towards documenting the nature of marital separation and divorce often non-empirically (Weiss, 1975; Bohannon, 1970; Gettleman & Markowitz, 1974; Goode, 1956). From this literature grew self-help and intervention strategies aimed at assisting persons in expecting and coping with stresses brought about by separation and divorce. The link between divorce and lifestyles after divorce has been implied in this literature, but often has not been addressed directly.

A third significant body of literature concerns the illustration of areas of competence and stress in single parent families, both for the parents as well as children (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974; Brown, Feldberg, Fox, & Kohen, 1976; Raschke, 1977; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). In this literature the inadequate parent model

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has been refuted strongly (c.f. Brown, et al, 1976; Brandwein, et al, 1974) or the demands of divorced parenting have been specified by clear analysis of relevant family variables (Hetherington, et al, 1978).

Fourth, examination of the literature on life satisfaction offers consistent evidence that divorced persons have lower evaluations of life satisfaction, or "contentment with one's lifestyle" than do married persons (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Robinson & Shaver, 1973; Zautra, Beier, & Cappel, 1977). Various explanations for these lower evaluations have been proposed, including satisfaction with sex life, amount of fun and enjoyment, job satisfaction, contentment with neighborhood (Andrews & Withey, 1976), as well as economic well-being and life crises (Zautra, et al, 1977) and social participation (Phillips, 1967). However, most studies of life satisfaction rest upon large scale survey research and neglect an integration of these life satisfaction results with our increasing knowledge of the post-divorce adjustment process.

There are at least three roles which divorced women with children assume which seem relevant in understanding life satisfaction during the post-divorce adjustment process. The first is the parent role. Parenting responsibilities shift during and after divorce, necessitating that a single parent household head assume a dual role of mother and father. While the increase in parenting reponsibility and the status of the single parent are somewhat unclear, there are indications that single parent families provide positive environments for children, as well as fostering a sense of autonomy and competence in women who head these families (Goode, 1956; Gongla, 1974; Brandwein, et al, 1974; Brown, et al, 1976; Hetherington, et al, 1978).

A second role adjustment faced by single parent divorced mothers involves the transition to single social participant in situations typically organized around couples. Although the divorced woman is not seen as isolated (Goode, 1956), recent evidence has emphasized the importance of establishing an active dating life post-divorce (Hetherington, et al, 1978; Raschke, 1977). In addition, a thorough understanding of the social participant role hinges upon inclusion of other facets of social support such as kin, friends, and ex-spouses (Colletta, 1979).

The role of economic self-supporter is one which demands much energy and nearly constant attention from single parent women. Previous literature supports a picture of economic hardship interfaced with just enough resources to manage as descriptive of most divorced women with children (Brandwein, et al, 1974; Brown, et al, 1976). The self-supporter role is often a difficult one with divorced women confronting hardships such as unemployment, outdated job skills, inadequate education, and inexperience in financial management (Goode, 1956; Hetherington, et al, 1978).

The purpose of the present study was to: (a) describe the life situations of a sample of divorced women with children in terms of

their perceived levels of competence in three life roles (parent, social participant, self-supporter); and (b) to relate these role specific perceived competencies to evaluations of life satisfaction. Answers to questions such as these should assist in the development of a competency-based model of single parenthood, and help illuminate factors in the lives of single parent divorced women which contribute to lower life satisfaction evaluations.

It was hypothesized that: (1) The parenting role would be the most highly evaluated role, followed by the social participant role, with the role of self-supporter the area of least perceived competence and (2) The role in which the women feel least competent (self-supporter) would have the strongest association with life satisfaction.

Method.

Subjects. Forty-seven divorced white women with custody of one or two children aged 5-18 residing in a city of 40,000 and the surrounding county volunteered to participate. Subjects were recruited through newspaper advertisements, local women's groups, an informal referral network, and the local chapter of Parents Without Partners. The mean age of the participants was 37. They had been divorced for a mean of 5.3 years, with a range of less than one year to 14 years. All of the women were employed, with the modal income category being an annual income of $10,000-$15,000, a middle range income for the locale.

Procedure. Subjects were interviewed in their homes for approximately one and one-half hours by the investigator. They were administered a battery of self-report instruments, including standardized life satisfaction inventories (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960; Bachman, Kahn, Davidson, & Johnson, 1967; Cantril, 1965). Perceived competence in each of the three roles was measured by a constructed likert-type 36 item scale, the Perceived Role Competency Scale (PRCS). Additional measures included items from Rotter's (1966) Locus of Control Scale reflective of a personal control factor (Gurin, Gurin, Leo, & Beattie, 1969), and a Cantril (1965) type self-anchoring ladder. Additional data were collected on socioeconomic variables, marital, educational, and employment history, and present dating patterns.

Results.

Hypothesis 1. The mean score for the parenting role on the PRCS and the Cantril type ladder items indicated that parenting was the most highly evaluated role, regardless of measure used (Table 1). While the self-supporter role was the least highly evaluated role on the Cantril measure, it was generally less clearly differentiated from the social participant role than was the parenting role. These results offer support for Hypothesis 1, particularly as concerns the high level of perceived competence in parenting.

Hypothesis 2. The role of lowest perceived competence, as predicted, correlated most strongly with life satisfaction ($r=.56, .48, p<.001$),

supporting Hypothesis 2 (Table 2). For each measure, the most highly evaluated role (parent) failed to correlate significantly with life satisfaction while correlations between the other two roles and life satisfaction were significant. A stepwise multiple regression predicting life satisfaction with the subscales of the PRCS indicated that the self-supporter role accounted for the most variance (R^2=.33) in life satisfaction while the remaining two subscales contributed little additional variance (Table 3). These results suggest that the average and below average life satisfaction evaluations of the present sample, as determined by the life satisfaction measures administered, can best be explained by the economic role variables, and not by parenting or social participant role factors.

Conclusions.

The results suggest that there are role-related differences in levels of perceived competence for divorced women with children. Explanations are also provided for the lower life satisfaction evaluations characteristic of this population. Several points can be made based upon the results presented.

First, the parenting role is clearly an area of high perceived competence. The data provide empirical support for the conclusions of previous literature which indicated that single parents feel competent in their parenting abilities and may feel better able to be consistent and supportive caretakers when alone than in an unhappy marital situation (Brandwein, et al, 1974; Brown, et al, 1976). This positive evaluation of parenting abilties may be attributed to a long term relationship with one's children, whereby children represent a critical, stable concern throughout the post-divorce adjustment process.

Of importance, secondly, is the emerging picture of the self-supported role and its relationship to life satisfaction. The women in general felt least competent in this role although the social participant role was also an area of diminished perceived competence. The link between life satisfaction and the self-supporter role is important in explaining the low life satisfaction evaluations of divorced persons. Relative to other life roles, it is the burden of managing financially and succeeding as a economic being that appears most responsible for the stresses of single parenthood. This is a particularly salient point since the present sample was an employed, middle income group. The implications for members of a lower income group might be expected to be even more severe. For example, it is unclear if a particular income level might exist, below which the stresses of managing financially might suppress evaluations of competence in other roles.

A number of expansions and directions for future research can be outlined based upon the present results. Greater specificity of the roles examined would yield more detailed data for understanding stresses and strengths in the families of single parent divorced women. For example, delineation of functions of friends and kin in social support networks and assessment of parents' knowledge of available resources might offer directions for potential interventions. The role of ex-spouses and a specification of sources

of income are additional variables which merit further attention.

In expanding the nature of the data which could be collected related to each role, the issue of the type of data obtained is also an important issue. For example, the parenting role would be augmented by gathering data on the children in these single parent families, or the self-supporter role might become more clearly understood if employers were interviewed. Such expansions of the present model necessitate an enlargement of the present methodology beyond self-report, paper and pencil measures to more "objective" data such as parent-child interactions, or by collecting data from sources such as schools, work settings, and members of social support networks.

The results obtained in the present investigation represent findings which are collapsed across the variable "length of time as a single parent". Further research should be directed towards understanding differences in perceived role competencies and their contributions to life satisfaction evaluations for groups of women divorced for varying lengths of time. Ideally a longitudinal study of post-divorce adjustment seems warranted as it has been suggested (Hetherington, et al, 1978) that the initial two years post-divorce are the most difficult. Similarly, understanding post divorce stressors and competencies may facilitate our knowledge of the factors that enter into post-divorce decision making processes, such as the decision to remarry, or to remain single. Such knowledge may also help document changes which single parent families undergo over time, moving towards a conceptualization of stages of family life in single parent, post-divorce families.

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Table 1

Mean Values of Perceived Role Competence

Role	PRCS[1]	Cantril-type items[2]
Parent	$\bar{x}$=1.96 $2_{=}$ .60 range=2.25	$\bar{x}$=7.04 $2_{=}$1.04 range=5.00
Social Participant	$\bar{x}$=2.10 $2_{=}$ .57 range=2.58	$\bar{x}$=5.85 $2_{=}$1.78 range=7.00
Self-supporter	$\bar{x}$=2.10 $2_{=}$ .52 range=2.58	$\bar{x}$=5.30 $2_{=}$1.74 range=8.00

[1]The PRCS is a 4 point likert scale with a lower score indicating higher perceived competence.

[2]The Cantril type items have a nine point response range with a higher score indicating higher perceived competence.

Table 2

Correlations Between Life Satisfaction and Role-Specific and Global Perceived Competence

Role	Measure	Correlation with Life Satisfaction
Parent	PRCS	ns
	Cantril	ns
Social Participant	PRCS	r=.35, p <.01
	Cantril	r=.26, p <.05
Self-supporter	PRCS	r=.56, p <.001
	Cantril	r=.48, p <.001
Global	Rotter (1966)	r=.33, p<.05

Table 3

Predicting Life Satisfaction With Perceived Role Competencies

(N=47)

Predictors	r	R^2	ΔR^2	F	p
Self supporter	.577	.333	.333	21.45	.001
Parent	.265	.341	.008	10.86	.001
Social Participant	.375	.343	.002	7.12	.001